



IMPACT OF COVID 19 NATIONAL LOCKDOWN ON WOMEN DOMESTIC WORKERS IN DELHI

Institute of Social Studies Trust

KEY FINDINGS

83% of women reported severe to moderate economic crises for their families causing further anxiety over security of jobs.

Lack of registration of domestic workers with unorganized sector social security board denies women of any government relief to be disbursed under the same.

Instances of water scarcity in some areas which hampers hand washing along with cramped living spaces, puts poor communities at high risk of contracting the corona virus.

34% respondents were not sure how and whom to contact in case of suspicion of having contacted the virus.

54% women reported that no one helped them in the household work; some women also had to do outside work such as arranging food, collecting rations, grinding flour, etc. owing to increased instances of police harassment of men.

Severe anxiety of women with regards to wages for March and subsequent months during the lockdown period

Sexual and reproductive health services for women were rather slack due to overall burden on health sector during Covid-19; increased risk of maternal and infant mortality owing to childbirths at home.

Women complained of long queues and over-crowding during food distribution or ration kits, at PDS shops and delays in processing of e-coupons for obtaining temporary rations.

51% of women faced difficulty in buying essential food items like milk, vegetables, tea etc. due to price hike during the lockdown.

Concerns about lack of protective equipment such as masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, etc. once domestic workers resume work.

57% respondents worried about paying their rents in the coming months as income will be affected even after lockdown is over.

INTRODUCTION

The severity of Covid-19 has led the government of India to impose one of the stringent lockdown and quarantine measure in the world. India is under a national lockdown since 25th March 2020 in order to maintain 'social distancing' to control the spread of the disease which has resulted in chaos, especially amongst the informal sector workers. The Director-General of ILO, Guy Ryder pointed out that, 'in urban areas, these workers also tend to work in economic sectors that "not only carry a high risk of virus infection but are also directly impacted by lockdown measures": waste recyclers, street vendors and food servers, construction workers, transport workers and domestic workers.¹ Further, pandemics make existing inequalities worse for women and girls, causes discrimination to other marginalized groups and those in extreme poverty.² The condition of women workers in the informal economy gets more vulnerable owing to their roles as workers in the market as well as care givers within their families. Prof. Jayati Ghosh points out that women in the informal economy will be the first ones to lose their jobs as they also hold the lowest jobs in the market.³

The objective of this study is to highlight the impact of the Covid-19 lockdown on livelihoods and lives of domestic workers in Delhi. The study also looks at challenges and barriers in accessing essential resources and services, information and practices around Covid-19 and their concerns for the future.⁴

DOMESTIC WORKERS

As per official estimates, there are 4.75 million domestic workers (NSS 2005) but this is a gross under-estimation and there could be close to 50 million domestic workers in India.⁵ Part of the global care economy, domestic work largely comprises of work done inside the household such as cleaning, washing clothes and utensils, cooking, child care and elderly care. This work is done across cities in India by poor and unskilled migrant women, from marginalized communities and vulnerable rural districts in India. Their work and workplace is invisible, undervalued, unrecognized and unregulated, and hence the sector suffers from low wages, lack of formal contract, decent work conditions and poor social security measures.⁶ The Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent national lockdown further aggravated the situation of the already vulnerable sector.



¹Please see: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2020/04/1061322>

²UNFPA (2020) Covid-19: A Gender Lens Protecting sexual and reproductive health and rights, and promoting gender equality. Retrieved on 16 April 2020 from <https://www.unfpa.org/resources/covid-19-gender-lens>

³A lecture and Q&A on the impact of Covid-19 on global economy and developing countries in particular, Zoom webinar, 1 April 2020.

⁴Please see methodology at the end of the Report.

⁵WIEGO (2014) Domestic Workers' Laws and Legal Issues in India. Retrieved on 6 May 2020 from wiego.org/sites/default/files/resources/files/Domestic-Workers-Laws-and-Legal-Issues-India.pdf

⁶Chigateri, S., M. Zaidi and A. Ghosh. (2016). Locating the Processes of Policy Change in the Context of Anti-Rape and Domestic Worker Mobilisations in India. Research Report. Geneva: UNRISD.

PROFILE OF RESPONDENTS

AGE GROUP: 21 – 60 YEARS

MARITAL STATUS

60%
MARRIED

17%
SEPARATED

17%
WIDOWED

2%
DIVORCED

DEPENDANTS

60% Children above 14 years

51% Unemployed spouses

11% Elderly members

3% Disabled family members

The survey was conducted with part-time, full-time and live-in domestic workers in Delhi, who are members of domestic worker group with Chetanalaya.

Study Sites: Shahpur Jat, Tilak Ngar, Okhla, Julena, Andrews Ganj, Mephar Garden, Gulmohar Park, Kalender Colony (Dilshad Garden) and Kotla.

IMPACT ON PAID WORK

In our survey, as per Figure 1, **54.3 % of the domestic workers reported they could not collect their March salaries owing to the sudden lockdown and restriction of mobility, while 14% reported fear of coronavirus for not being able to collect their wage. As a result, almost 83% women reported facing severe to moderate economic crises in their families (see Figure 2).** However, some of the live-in workers in the survey reported no impact on salaries and some employers who anticipated the lockdown did pay advance salaries for March to their part-time domestic workers (20%, as per Figure 1).

Figure 1: Reasons for fall in income

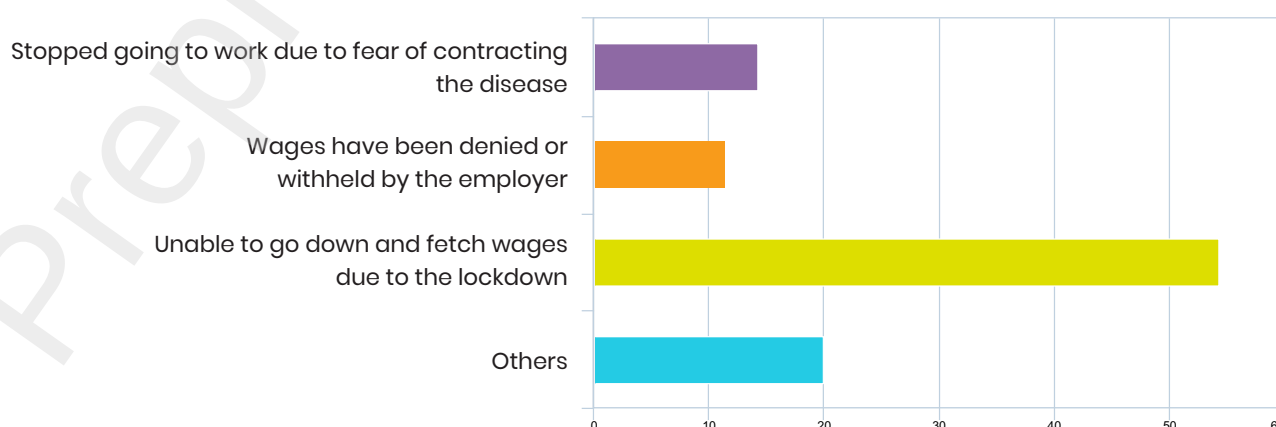
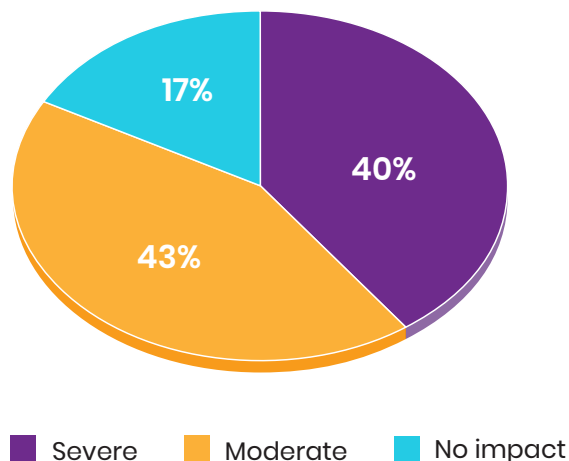


Figure 2: Impact on paid work



In the interviews, a domestic worker leader shared that,

“Some women managed to collect their wages from their employers, after much difficulty, during the lockdown risking policing and contracting the virus as otherwise their families would have faced acute food insecurity.” (Savita, Tilak Nagar, April 2020)

Domestic worker groups and unions reported that in spite of some domestic workers having back accounts, most employers and domestic workers still preferred cash in hand and as a result for many their March salaries are stuck with employers. (KII interviews, April 2020).

Interestingly it was also reported that part-time or full-time domestic workers who were unmarried or alone were asked by their employers to move in with them for the lockdown period (some did to save costs on food). However, it would be important to understand if they were paid for the extra hours put in as part of the new arrangement. A community leader from the Domestic Worker's Forum informed that in the beginning of the lockdown some employers still asked domestic workers to come to work and she observed that women who are not part of the union or groups or in dire need found it difficult to refuse,

“It was only when a positive case was reported in the area that employers stopped domestic workers from coming...I was also asked by my employer to come but I told her that am I not a citizen of the country; when the Prime Minister has asked everyone to stop going to work then why should you ask me to come to work?” (Savita, Tilak Nagar, April 2020)

Around **85%** women responded that they managed the expenses for March, especially food and rent, from their existing savings while **14%** borrowed from their relatives/neighbours. However, there's much anxiety and stress over wages for April and subsequent months and most feel that their employers will not pay for these months. Respondents also voiced their hesitation, shame and embarrassment in seeking direct help as many of the employers had turned them down when they asked for help,

“Even if they have directly not refused, one can understand from the tone of their voice that they are not going to pay me for month of April.” (Zarina, New Seemapuri, April 2020)

A domestic worker, during survey, also commented on the informal nature of employer-employee relationship which exists in domestic work and shared her misgiving, which was also echoed by others:

“Didi, I have been working in these houses for 12-15 years, yet since the lockdown, not a single employer has called me to ask about my well-being...usually they call me beta, beta but in reality we are not their beta. I wonder what our relationship with them is.” (as shared by Anushikha, Chetanalaya, April 2020)

Further, many domestic workers are also anxious and concerned with job loss post lockdown, as many employers will not allow their domestic workers to join work until the threat of the pandemic settles down,

“I work in two houses only due to health issues. One house already has two live-in workers and other house has assured me to pay my salary for April but I wonder for how long will they continue to pay if I don't return to work” (Geeta, Chirag Delhi, April 2020)

IMPACT ON UNPAID WORK

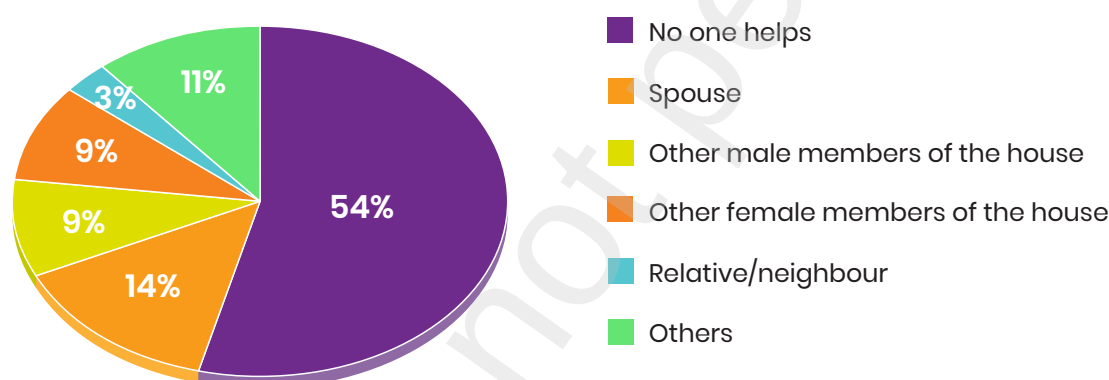
Since the lockdown, families have been staying together and as a result, **54% domestic workers reported increased domestic work burden such as cleaning, cooking, washing, etc.**; **23% stated time spent in arranging for food and other essentials**, **20% reported increased care giving** and **14% stated time spent in collecting water**. Interestingly, many women who were on their own or had smaller families said there was not much to do,

“We have a small room which doesn’t take time to clean and now I get bored” (Mary, Shahpur Jat, April 2020)

With regards to sharing of household work, **54% reported that no one helped them, while only 14% reported their spouses helped** (see Figure 3). Women living in household with more number of family members reported increase in unpaid work burden; Zarina who has eight members in her family says:

“My household work has increased tremendously and no one helps me...not even my mother is able to help. I am also keeping roza now and it becomes very difficult for me to do housework and take care of my child...There’s also increased arguments in homes in the neighbourhood. The men are at home and keep demanding tea or something. How long can the poor women keep serving, she has numerous other work as well.” (interview, April 2020)

Figure 3: Sharing of unpaid work in the household



Usually the men step out for buying medicines or rations. In case of Geeta, however, **due to concern of increased police violence on boys during the lockdown, she does not allow her son to go out and does all the outside work herself**, along with caring for her paralyzed husband and other household work.

IMPACT ON ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Food insecurity for the poor has been a paramount concern during the national lockdown. In response to the same, the state government came up with a slew of measures⁷. As seen in **Figure 4, 44% of the domestic workers received dry rations from the PDS shops⁸, followed by some groceries being bought at the local kirana stores (26%).⁹** Women also complained that many kirana stores are now selling at inflated prices even when it is against the law. While some were able to receive rations by submitting e-coupons, others are still waiting for their requests to be processed. Domestic workers unions have pointed out that lack of smart phones, data services, tedious process of filling the e-coupons, printing of the e-coupon, etc. act as barriers for most people to submit e-coupons for temporary rations. (KII interviews, April 2020)

Almost **51% women shared that the prices of items like vegetables, fruits, tea, sugar etc. had gone up significantly** and they did not have enough money in hand to afford these items, especially milk for small children. Zarina, who works part-time in one household (monthly income Rs.1500/-) and a single mother of a 6 year old girl, shared,

“Earlier I could buy a bottle of Horlicks for my child but now I am trying to give her at least a small cup of milk each day...I am trying to save money as I don’t think I will receive my salary for April.” (Interview, April 2020)

Figure 4: Access to food rations during national lockdown



Despite attempts at social distancing being made at PDS shops by strict policing and selective timing, women complained of long queues,

“Women in the neighbourhood are fighting over rations; some family members receive more rations as they all have ration cards while others receive small quantities or no ration despite queuing for a long time.” (Zarina, New Seemapuri, April 2020)

⁷Delhi government first announced distribution of extra rations for those who had PDS ration cards, followed by issue of Temporary rations (5 kg per month) for those without ration cards through submission of ‘e-coupons’. This was primarily done because most poor informal workers are migrants in Delhi whose identity documents usually belong to their native villages. The state government also set up community kitchens in municipal schools distributing cooked food and these have become lifelines for people who are now left with no income or savings to buy food rations or cylinders to cook food at home.

⁸This also included those who had applied for temporary rations through submitting e-coupons and had received the same.

⁹In most questions under Access to essential services and resources, multiple options up to 3 were asked; for the purpose of this report, an overall trend has been captured.

Meanwhile, many people are surviving on the food distributed at the government-run community kitchens.

There were also complaints of over-crowding and conflicts over ration and food distribution by individuals and NGOs:

“We asked an NGO to help us with rations for 125 member families. The first day we distributed 80 ration kits, but on second day the distribution stopped as some community people were troubled over outsiders being provided with rations while the needy families within the community were left out. I tried to explain that these were for domestic worker members but they wouldn’t listen. Now other members are arguing that they did not get rations while other members have received the same.” (Savita, Tilak Nagar, April 2020)

While shortages in water supply and gas cylinders was not apparent in the survey, but in the interviews women shared that they were rationing the use of cylinder by cooking one-pot meals in order for the cylinder to last a long time, affecting their usual diets (Anushikha, Chetanalaya, April 2020). Similarly, Chinmayee, Nirmana shared that,

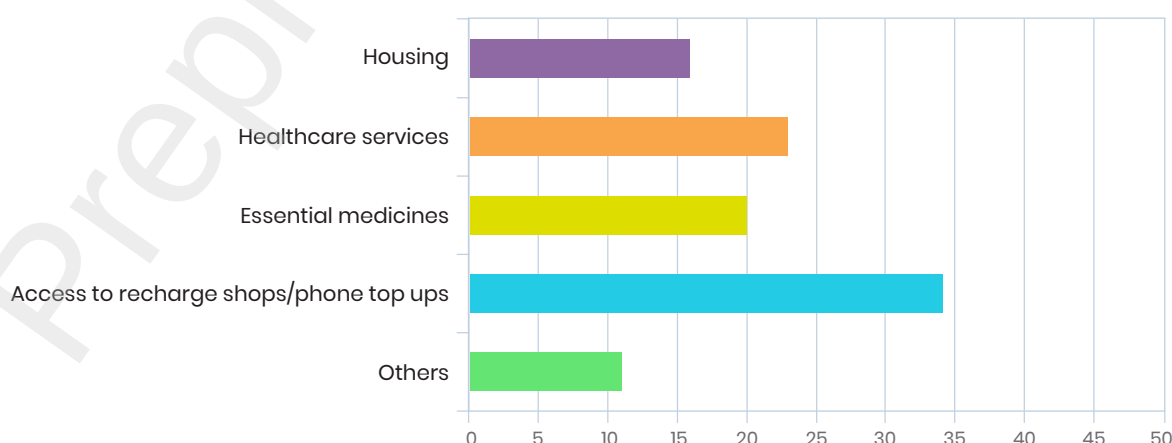
“With the beginning of summer, a few JJ colonies in North-West Delhi were complaining about water shortages owing to more water consumption as everyone is at homes...also there’s no space in the jhuggis to store a lot of water.” (Interview, April 2020)

Water-shortage and cramped living spaces makes frequent hand-washing and other safe practices difficult exposing the vulnerable further to infection. Further, in these uncertain times, communication is vital and **almost 34% women faced problems in recharging their phones because of loss of income and shops being closed.**

Women also complained of **challenges in accessing health services (23%) and essential medicines (20%)**, in Figure 5 below, because of closure of OPDs in hospitals and private clinics, restriction on mobility and lack of income was also shared by women. With the entire health sector and available funds being allocated towards controlling the pandemic as a result, there is a severe lack of focus on women’s sexual and reproductive health services.¹⁰ As such, many women have been forced to give home births, risking infant and maternal mortality rate,

“A pregnant woman was turned away by DDU which is now a Covid-19 hospital. Due to lack of money she could not afford private clinic hence a dai was arranged. There’s another woman who had come from her village and got stuck here due to sudden lockdown...I hope she does not go into labour during the lockdown.” (Savita, Tilak Nagar, April 2020)

Figure 5: Access to other essentials (besides food/fuel/water)



Home-deliveries during this time may result in loss of maternity benefits for pregnant women enrolled in central schemes such as Pradhan Mantri Matritva Vandana Yojna (PMMVY) the Janani Suraksha Yojna", unless the government gives specific directives under these unique circumstances.

Another major concern has been about housing and house rents, **most domestic worker families are migrants in the city and despite of a notice in March, followed by a government order issued by Delhi government which dissuades landlords for asking for rents, many domestic workers complained that they had to pay some amount as rent**, which they managed from their savings, and have been ordered to pay the rest in parts in the next couple of months. Chinmayee from Nirmana observes,

"In Hyderpuri, everyone is a poor person including the landlord and for him collecting rent is a way to feed his family so it is difficult to blame anyone in this situation." (Interview, April 2020)

In fact, 43% were concerned about continues loss in incomes in the next few months and as a result, 57% respondents worried about paying their rents in the coming months as income will be affected even after lockdown is over.

INFORMATION, RESPONSES AND PRACTICES AROUND COVID-19

Source of Information on Covid-19: 94% television, 54% family and neighbourhood, 48% social media such as Whatsapp/Facebook.

Mostly using dupattas, handkerchiefs or homemade masks for covering.

Social distance is maintained in the main roads but not possible in small cramped slums.

Over-crowding happens sometimes during distribution of rations kits.

In spite of social messaging, 34% respondents are not sure how and whom to contact in case of suspicion of having contacted the virus.

"I got to know about it first from the place where I work. They told me that there is illness which is spreading so one has to careful and should not wander around; wash hands etc. and now it is in mobile as well and when I go out to purchase vegetables I get to know more about it"
(Mary, Shahpur Jat)

¹⁰Report on Gendered Impacts of Covid-19: Prevention and Mitigation Webinar organized by Martha Farrell Foundation and PRIA International Academy on 11 April 2020

¹¹In both these scheme, institutional birth is necessary to avail maternity benefits under the scheme.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The government must ensure immediate **income security and rent protection** for domestic workers for the period of lockdown through advisories issued in newspapers, television, etc.

Domestic worker groups and unions must involve in ensuring **immediate relief by sharing information and awareness about government relief schemes**, assistance in filling e-coupons for temporary rations in Delhi, ensuring hygienic, nutritious and satisfactory meals in government community kitchens, ensuring proper implementation and access to relief for domestic workers to relief under various government schemes.

Initiate **domestic workers Helpline** in case of any economic grievance or violence faced by domestic workers from their employers.

Campaign with employers against non-payment and/or deduction of wages, stigmatization of worker because of her neighbourhood, **provision of protective gear such as masks, gloves, hand sanitizers, etc.** to ensure safety.

Educate and involve Central Trade Unions in the domestic workers movement for greater visibility and negotiation with the government.

Fast tracking registration of domestic workers to the Unorganized Workers Social Security Board as per Supreme Court notification issues in 2017

A **Taskforce** must be set up by state Labour ministry for recommendations for long term relief and protection of domestic workers' rights.

More **sustained research and data to be collected** about the impact of the pandemic on domestic work across country, region and global to create evidence for wider regulation, social security measures and decent work conditions for domestic workers.

METHODOLOGY NOTE

ISST partnered with Domestic Worker Forum (DWF), Chetanalaya to conduct a telephonic survey (using google forms) with 35 women workers in the sector between 23 - 28 April 2020. The ISST team also conducted telephonic interviews with key informants and a few women workers in each sector, based on access. All data collecting tools were translated in Hindi and consent was taken prior to any data collection. Names of women respondents have been changed to maintain confidentiality.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We would like to thank Anushikha and her team at Chetanalaya for conducting the survey and Chinmayee, Nirmana and Elizabeth Kh., Gharelu Kaamgaar Sanghathan for giving us time to share their insights. Lastly, a heartfelt thanks to all the women domestic workers who participated in this study in spite of their ongoing hardships.

AUTHORS

This study report was written by Anweshaa Ghosh and Ashmeet Kaur Bilkhu, with support from Shiney Chakraborty in quantitative data analysis, ISST, May 2020

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